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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA NEA A/S-EQUIVALENT ON LEBANON, JULY 24

REF: BEIRUT 1094 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b) and (d).

Summary:

¶1. (C) The French are starting to worry about the clock ticking down in Lebanon and the decreasing likelihood of a carefully sequenced settlement that addresses the need to elect a successor to President Lahoud as well as form a new government representing the different factions. NEA A/S-Equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon reviewed with us July 24 French impressions of the Celle Saint-Cloud gathering and French emissary Jean Claude Cousseran's July 17-18 visit to Damascus. His spare account of Cousseran's meeting with the Syrians was consistent with most versions of the tough line we hear Paris laid down (especially the denial that France has any intention at this time to open a dialogue about bilateral or other regional subjects. Felix-Paganon also denied the Special Tribunal came up at all. The Syrians were on their best behavior but were disappointed that France did not want to turn a new page in the relationship. France is following Michel Aoun's situation closely and is convinced that he is a powerful force to be reckoned with in the Christian community. The Metn by-elections will test his strength, especially as his candidate goes up against former President Amine Gemayel for the parliamentary seat that belonged to Gemayel's slain son. Although Felix-Paganon denied repeatedly that the GOF backed Aoun, he warned that the volatile political situation in Lebanon could suddenly turn things decisively in Aoun's favor and make this less than "solid" candidate the favorite. Cousseran is on his way back to Paris for consultations with FM Kouchner prior to the latter's travel to Beirut July 28 to follow up the Celle Saint-Cloud discussions. Felix-Paganon outlined the two likely worst-case scenarios that could result in rival Lebanese governments and a probably decisive loss of Arab support for the Siniora government. To reinforce the time constraints at play, Felix-Paganon reminded us that the GOF, and most of Lebanon, will be out on vacation for nearly all of August. End summary

Celle Saint-Cloud as Prelude

¶2. (C) French MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon told us July 24 that France's priority in Lebanon is setting the stage for FM Kouchner's return to Beirut July 28 to reconvene the participants in the Celle Saint-Cloud meeting earlier this month. He repeated the view that, given modest

expectations prior to Celle Saint-Cloud, France had achieved its primary goal of reestablishing dialogue among the various Lebanese factions. Felix-Paganon pointedly stated that the level was intentionally fixed well below the leadership, in order to bring together people who knew each other and would likely maintain contact once they returned to Beirut. While he understood the frustration that more was not accomplished at Celle Saint-Cloud and acknowledged the cynicism accompanying the absence of agreement by the parties on the way ahead, France was pleased to have reached consensus on the willingness to talk. Felix-Paganon noted that initial arguments had not marred the generally good personal feelings at the end of the meeting but conceded that it was hard to see how disagreements over re-forming a government, electing President Lahoud's successor, and the sequencing of these steps could be accomplished before the end of Lahoud's term. When asked whether any side seemed more open to dialogue or compromise, Felix-Paganon observed, the Aounists presented themselves as the "most open," particularly when contrasted with the Christians associated with March 14. Hizballah was, in his view, the most effective and capable delegation despite its hard line and reminders that it did not have authority to negotiate the sort of package deal Kouchner would have preferred to put on the table. Looking ahead to the meetings in Beirut, Felix-Paganon speculated that France, which he stressed sought to encourage dialogue rather than press for a solution, would find that the Lebanese have an easier time talking freely in Paris than Beirut.

Cousseran in Damascus: All about Lebanon

13. (C) Felix-Paganon gave a spare readout of French

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emissary Jean-Claude Cousseran's visit to Damascus last week that was nevertheless consistent with what we have seen elsewhere. He called the atmosphere in Damascus "surreal" as the Syrians agreed with all of Cousseran's core points (maintenance of peace and security in Lebanon, support for the dialogue relaunched at Celle Saint-Cloud, respect for Lebanon's independence and its political institutions, election of a new president before Lahoud's mandate expires, etc.). Cousseran, he continued, was "honest" in recalling past Syrian sins in Lebanon and firmly countered Syrian protestations that problems of the recent past were "personal" and that it was time to turn the page. Cousseran, according to Felix-Paganon, rejoined that the disagreements between Damascus and Paris over Lebanon were political and could not be waved away. Significantly, not even the ever-argumentative Vice President Shara' offered strong objection to Cousseran's presentation. "They were sweet like honey," Felix-Paganon said of Shara' and FM Mu'allim. Contrary to what we have heard elsewhere, Felix-Paganon claimed the Syrians did not raise the Special Tribunal and that Cousseran had intentionally avoided the subject so as not to legitimize any Syrian claim or standing vis-a-vis the Tribunal. To keep the focus entirely on the current political situation in Lebanon, Cousseran did not raise foreign fighters or any other issues. France does not, he concluded this portion of the meeting, intend to open a dialogue with Syria about bilateral or other regional subjects.

14. (C) Beyond acknowledging that Cousseran had traveled elsewhere in the region, Felix-Paganon did not relate any further details from that trip. He denied that Cousseran visited Tehran a second time despite press and other reporting indicating that he had. (Comment: Syria/Lebanon desk officer subsequently explained that the confusion about a second visit seems to stem from the fact that Cousseran made two trips to Iran prior to Celle Saint-Cloud. He complained that he has since been fielding Lebanese press queries about a post-Celle Saint-Cloud stop in Tehran. End comment) Now that he is back in Beirut, Cousseran has started making the rounds again among Lebanese figures to

prepare for Kouchner's visit that is still expected to start Saturday, July 28, and run into early next week. Felix-Paganon claimed not to have more than very sketchy preliminary reports on how Cousseran's Beirut consultations were faring other than being generally "positive." He claimed not to know whether Cousseran had yet been in contact with Hizballah.

"Aoun is Not Our Candidate"

15. (C) We asked how France regards Michel Aoun these days. Felix-Paganon responded that the upcoming by-elections in the Metn could test Aoun's strength and directly affect his expected presidential bid. France thinks former President Amine Gemayel faces a serious challenge as he stands for slain son Pierre's parliamentary seat. Felix-Paganon estimated that support for Aoun among Maronites, which had gone as high as 60 percent in the last election, was now closer to 30-50 percent. This may be less than before but more than any level of support for any other Christian leader. With a minimum of 20-30 percent firm support in the Lebanese Christian community at large, Felix-Paganon contended Aoun was a force any Christian presidential candidate had to take into account, given the atomization of support for other presidential wannabes. France considers Aoun's acquiescence in another candidacy a sine qua non to elect anyone else.

16. (C) After we made clear our reservations about Aoun's suitability, Felix-Paganon hastened to assert that France had no preferred candidate, including Aoun. The extremely fluid political situation, however, raises the prospect that support for Aoun could rapidly coalesce, and he warned that things can and likely will change quickly and unexpectedly. France, he repeated several times, does not back Aoun and believes that he is not the "solid" sort of figure Lebanon needs. Despite his association with Hizballah, Felix-Paganon stated it was unclear whether Aoun enjoyed Hizballah's full support. The Vatican was reputedly "not hostile" to an Aoun bid, but Maronite Patriarch Sfeir persisted in his total opposition.

Down to the Wire We Go...

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17. (C) Among France's key tasks at the moment, according to Felix-Paganon, is preventing the March 14 majority from pushing for presidential election over the objections of the speaker of parliament. One of the two dire scenarios that could play out is one in which any president elected by a simple parliamentary majority is branded illegal by the opposition and a rival government forms that could include a significant number of Christian and Muslim heavyweights. Arab governments would not want to have to choose between the two with the net result being a significant loss of support for the Siniora government and a push for the sort of compromise that would not be in Lebanon's best interest. The only way out, Felix-Paganon concluded, was to push March 14 now to strike a meaningful political accord. We asked whether March 14 was open to compromise, to which Felix-Paganon replied, after hesitating, that it was relatively so but not decisively. Some members, for example, have asked about the utility of a new government that would only last until the election of a new president while others questioned the idea of a government that would only last through the remainder of the current parliamentary term. All of this raises the second anticipated worst-case scenario in which Lahoud, at the end of his term, appoints a prime minister of his choosing a la Amine Gemayel in 1988 to exercise full executive authority.

18. (C) Felix-Paganon opined that, unfortunately, no political accord is likely until the last minute. FM

Kouchner will go to Beirut this weekend, but it is uncertain what he will achieve or what will follow (including a possible additional meeting in Celle Saint-Cloud). There is a possibility the minister will go on to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. France was also waiting to see what form the evolving Swiss initiative takes. The Lebanese penchant for brinksmanship was testing everyone's nerves. As the clock ticks down and the time for a sequence of steps is compressed, it is increasingly likely that the composition of a new government and election of a new president would have to occur simultaneously.

...But Not Until after Vacation

¶9. (C) The clock is ticking down in another sense, too, Felix-Paganon noted. Kouchner is projected to return to Paris from Beirut and perhaps elsewhere in the region o/a July 31. The Council of Ministers meets August 1 before President Sarkozy and French ministers depart on vacation. Ambassador Emie departs post August 3, and his successor does not arrive before the end of the month. Felix-Paganon said he will depart soon for most of August. Many of Lebanon's political figures will go on vacation in August as well. When we wondered whether Syria might use that period to shake things up, Felix-Paganon expressed doubt, adding that not even Iran or Hizballah (still recovering from last year's war, despite public claims to the contrary) had an interest in doing so. All signs pointed to a busy September that, based on Felix-Paganon's reading. He went so far as to posit a nightmare scenario in which we would be working to stave off political disaster in Lebanon at the same time in late December he believes there might be a showdown at the UN over maintaining pressure on Iran over its nuclear program.

Comment:

¶10. (C) We understand that Cousseran has left Beirut to return to Paris for consultations with Kouchner before the 28th. Felix-Paganon was in good spirits and generally candid about how France sees things in Lebanon before the final push prior to the end of Lahoud's term even if he confirmed that the French were still making it up as they go along. Felix-Paganon also mostly said the right things about Aoun, although the granular detail with which he described Aoun's situation indicates that Paris is watching Aoun's efforts to strengthen his position extremely closely. Paris clearly does not rule out Aoun's ability to exploit his strength and the relative weakness of his likely opponents under current circumstances. For the moment, Paris is keeping its distance but remains worried that no strong Christian alternative has yet emerged.

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